DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 002 FL 017 795

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TITLE Listening Ability: An Overlooked Dimension of Foreign Language Acquisition.
PUB DATE Feb 89
NOTE 28p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS French; Higher Education; *Language Processing; *Language Proficiency; *Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; Predictor Variables; Second Language Learning; Skill Development; Spanish; *Transfer of Training

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between native language (NL) listening skills and foreign language (FL) learning. Research questions addressed: (1) whether a relationship exists between NL listening ability and overall FL proficiency, between NL listening ability and FL listening comprehension skills, and between NL listening ability and FL oral proficiency; (2) which linear combination of NL listening skills correlates most highly with FL listening comprehension skills, oral proficiency, and overall FL proficiency; (3) which linear combination of independent variables (Watson-Barker test overall score, sex, length of previous language exposure, the language exposed to, and last contact with that language) best predicts overall FL proficiency; and (4) how each individual variable contributes to the predictability of FL proficiency. Subjects were students enrolled in an intensive college summer language program in French and Spanish. Results suggest a positive relationship between listening ability and overall FL ability, FL listening comprehension skills, and FL oral skills. When listening was examined as a set of skills, the portions of variance in FL learning that can be explained by listening ability range from 11 to 38 percent. NL listening ability appears to be a previously unidentified factor contributing to the second language learning process. (MSE)

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Listening Ability: An Overlooked Dimension of Foreign Language Acquisition.

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Prepared for presentation at annual meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association, 21-24 February 1989, Savannah, Georgia.

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Listening Ability: an Overlooked Dimension of Foreign Language Acquisition.

Since the 1970s, the emphasis on teaching languages for proficiency and the emphasis on language as a means of communication have given a new dimension to the receptive skills as essential communication skills. Since then, the foreign language teaching field set aside a response-oriented paradigm and adopted an input, or stimulus-oriented learning paradigm (Nord, 1977) whereby listening comprehension and delayed oral practice are the basis of instruction. Foreign language teachers are now taught to have students delay oral practice and listen to the target language before engaging in other activities. There is evidence to suggest that this is a productive way of teaching a language (Asher, 1977; Nord, 1977; Postovsky, 1975; Winitz & Reeds, 1973). If the field has so moved, if the listening skill is to be drawn upon so heavily during the teaching process, and if listening is essential to language acquisition, then more attention needs to be paid to the skills needed for effective listening and to the nature of listening. We need to know whether the students know how to listen.

The purpose of this study was chiefly exploratory and conceptual. It was an attempt to determine the extent to which the listening ability of students in their native language would ultimately affect the degree to which they would make progress toward foreign language proficiency. It

examines whether more attention needs to be paid to listening as a necessary skill in the diagnosing and preparation of foreign language students, and whether one's listening skill is a good predictor of language achievement. The following specific questions were addressed: (a) Is there a relationship between listening ability and overall foreign language proficiency, between listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension skills, and between listening ability and foreign language oral proficiency skills? (b) Which linear combination of listening skills, as defined by the components of the Watson-Barker test, correlates most highly with foreign language listening comprehension skills, with foreign language oral proficiency, and with overall foreign language proficiency? (c) What is the best linear combination of the following set of independent variables to predict FL overall proficiency: the Watson-Barker test overall score, sex, length of previous language exposure, the language exposed to, last contact with the language? Additionally, what is the individual contribution of each separate variable to the predictability of FL proficiency?

In order to conceptualize the relationship between listening ability and foreign language acquisition, the literature pertaining to these two fields needs to be reviewed.

Listening.

The groundwork for the recognition of listening as a field of inquiry has been laid primarily in the late 1940s by the pioneering works of the "fathers of listening," James Brown, Ralph Nichols, and Carl Weaver (Smith, 1987), although modern researchers have been studying listening for about 60 years. Even though it was in 1926 that Rankin found listening to be the most frequently used mode of human communication (Roberts, 1987), it was not until the late 1940s that listening research studies were attempted and study committees established.[1]

From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, researchers focused on the pedagogical aspect of listening and the assessment of listening. The listening researchers focused mainly on comprehensive (listening for understanding) and critical listening (acceptance or rejection of messages) (Rhodes, 1987). In 1979 the first professional society, the International Listening Association, was established solely for the advancement of listening. It brought together researchers from such varied fields as communication, psychology, counseling, education, political science, philosophy, business, law, and sociology. Rhodes (1987) has reported that the focus of the listening literature has recently shifted toward the identification and assessment of specific listening skills. This current focus is related to the publication of various reports on American education in

which listening instruction was viewed as an area needing significant attention.[2] Rhodes (1987) advocates that listening needs to be studied "as a relational concept within the total context of the communication process" (p.46) where there is an interdependent relationship between the speaker and the listener. This is assuredly a sophisticated development since the 1950s. Farra (1983) confirmed and illustrated this new focus by defining what he identifies as the four major turning points in the understanding of listening: (a) Plutarch's time with an emphasis on listening to lectures; (b) the 1950s with an emphasis on comprehensive listening and Nichols' (1957) 10 bad listening habits; (c) the 1960s with an emphasis on empathic listening, originating with Carl Rogers; and (d) more recently with an emphasis on relational listening where the total environment is of importance (Arnett & Nakagawa, 1983; Friedman, 1956; Rhodes, 1987; Thomlison, 1984).

An examination of the literature on listening revealed that listening is central to all learning. More than 45% of our total communication time is spent in listening, speaking takes 30%, reading takes 16%, and writing, 9% (Nichols & Leonard, 1957; Rankin, 1930). Listening time increases even more for students. J. Brown (1987) pointed out that up to about the sixth grade, listening is the most efficient learning mode, and 60% of elementary students' classroom time is spent in listening (Wilt, 1950). From then on, as

students learn to make greater use of other modes, their listening ability begins to deteriorate and drops to a lower level by the time they enter college, which can create problems since the lecture system, which draws heavily upon the listening skills, remains the norm in higher education (J. Brown, 1987). Listening is a primary activity of college-age students (Curtis, 1986). As J. Brown (1987) has stated, "Listening ability lies at the very heart of all growth, from birth through the years of formal education. The better those learning skills are developed, the more productive our learning efforts" (p. 10). Yet, most of us have not received any training in listening. Nichols found during a research study carried out at the University of Minnesota at St. Paul that "a student's listening index correlated most positively with success or lack of it in college. . . . such things as IQ, while related to level of success, were not as crucial a predictor as was the listening efficiency of the student" (Curtis, 1986, p. 5).

As much as listening is the foundation of formal education, it is also the foundation of language acquisition (J. Brown, 1987). At birth we know nothing about language, and yet we will complete the greater part of the first language acquisition process within our first five years, depending exclusively on listening. This includes discovering the rules of phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Surprisingly enough, what is referred to in the

second language acquisition literature and neurolinguistic literature (Krashen, 1973; Lenneberg, 1967; Scovel, 1969) as the critical period and loss of brain plasticity or inability to learn a language with native-like proficiency appears to parallel the deterioration of our listening abilities.

In spite of the numerous research studies and efforts to win recognition for the field, consensus on a definition of listening has not yet been reached. Many researchers have resorted to adapting typical definitions of reading comprehension to the listening process (Mead, 1986). In 1971, Lundsteen defined listening by stating that it was "the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the Mind" (Devine, 1978, p. 297). Listening is more than simply hearing or perceiving aural stimuli, and it is more than mere comprehension as it was defined in the 1950s.

Wolvin and Coakley (1979) described five different kinds of listening: discriminative, comprehensive, critical, therapeutic, and appreciative. According to the purpose and audience of the listening tests, different components may be appropriate. Discriminative listening allows a listener to become sensitive to arguments and language and to distinguish fact from opinion (Strother, 1987). Comprehensive listening helps a listener to understand a message. Critical listening allows a listener to evaluate and then to accept or reject a message (Strother, 1987). Therapeutic listening enables the listener to serve as a sounding board, without evaluating or

judging the message (Strother, 1987). Appreciative listening is carried on for enjoyment or to gain a sensory impression. Wolvin andd Coakley (1985) defined the process of listening as "the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli" (p. 74). The elements included in their definition can be found in most definitions of listening. Many definitions also include another process: "responding." Rhodes (1987) pointed out that Steil, Barker, and Watson (1983) argue that "the response stage of listening is especially crucial for judging the success of the listening act as a whole" (p.22). Steil, Barker, and Watson (1983) defined listening in terms of four related activities: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. This is the definition that was accepted for the purpose of this study. Sensing refers to taking in messages verbally and nonverbally. Interpreting refers to understanding. Evaluation involves sorting fact from opinion and agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker. Responding includes verbal and nonverbal cues (Rhodes, 1987). Steil, Barker, and Watson (1983) found this last activity to be particularly important in determining "whether the person in the role of speaker has been successful in getting his or her point across" (Rhodes, 1987, p. 36) since the other three processes/activities cannot be directly observed.

The diversity of theoretical constructs and definitional battles have led to differences and disagreements about the

best means for assessing listening. Within the last two decades the conceptualization of listening has been broadened. New instruments such as the Kentucky Test of Listening Comprehension (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980) and the Watson-Barker Listening Test (WBLT) (Watson & Barker, 1983), which have been developed in the 1980s, have included aspects of critical listening and nonverbal listening as opposed to the more traditional listening tests based on adaptations of typical reading definitions focusing on the comprehension aspect of listening. Indeed, the information communicated in a typical exchange involves both verbal and nonverbal aspects of the language. Meaning can be apprehended through the words spoken, which represent the linguistic aspect, as well as through the tone of voice, pitch, intonation, stress, and other paralinguistic features, and, finally, through the nonverbal aspect including gestures, facial expressions, and so on.

Foreign Language Teaching.

In the last two decades, the communicative and proficiency-oriented approaches to language teaching have placed increasing importance on listening comprehension as a methodological concern (Asher, 1977; Krashen, 1982; Omaggio, 1986; Postovsky, 1975). Language acquisition is based on what we hear and understand (decoding messages). As we acquire a language, our focus is on the meaning of the message used for real communicative purposes (Krashen, 1982).

The most innovative methods of language teaching that have emerged in the last decade, such as Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR), Gattegno's Silent Way, Curran's Community Language Learning, Lozanov's Suggestopaedia, and Terrell's Natural Approach, all share one common goal, that is, communicative competence (Underwood, 1984). For all these methods, the priority of listening over speaking or the importance given to listening comprehension is a common denominator. Dunkel (1986) indicated that "this goal [the development of communicative competence and oral fluency] is achieved by putting the horse (listening comprehension) before the cart (oral production). In other words, the key to achieving proficiency in speaking is developing proficiency in listening comprehension (Belasco, 1981)" (p. 100).

Even though the field has thus moved from a response-oriented paradigm to an input, or stimulus-oriented learning paradigm (Nord, 1977), listening has been viewed not as a skill, but as an activity to be used in foreign language instruction. Some studies seem to imply that there is a listening phenomenon in its own right, quite independent of its function in second language acquisition processes and that it might have a bearing on the language acquisition process. However, there has been no significant investigation of that question. Instead, we have been assuming that foreign language learners (and teachers!) know

how to listen (in their native language--independently from a particular linguistic system) and that they are ready for an intensive listening involvement or that this essential skill will develop on its own (Long, 1986; Omaggio, 1986). "We cannot assume that listening skills are keen in the first language or that students' listening strategies are efficient. Consequently, teachers must attend both to the general process of listening comprehension and to comprehension in the foreign language" (College Entrance Examination Board, 1986, p. 75). Students who enroll in language courses may need skills in listening. Consequently, those responsible for foreign language instruction need to attend to three questions: (a) Are their students' listening skills affecting their language achievement? (b) What is the relationship between listening and language acquisition? (c) What does listening entail?

METHOD.

Sample

Students enrolled in the 1987 summer intensive language program of the department of Romance Languages at the University of Tennessee were requested to respond to the video-version of the Watson-Barker Listening Test (WBLT) at the beginning of the language program. Only data from students who responded to the WBLT, completed the language

program, and took the departmental foreign language test at the end of the program were used. Data were analyzed from 90 students: 36 students of French and 54 students of Spanish, representing 85.7% of the participating sample.

Instrumentation

Listening was defined as a complex process consisting of at least four connected activities: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding (Steil, Barker, & Watson. 1983). Among the factors examined were the listening skills related to these activities, as conceptualized in the WBLT. The Watson-Barker Listening Test video version (Watson & Barker, 1987), which was used in this study, is composed of five subtests designed to measure listening skills in different situations. The five parts are: (a) evaluating message content, (b) understanding meaning in conversations, (c) understanding and remembering information in lectures, (d) evaluating emotional meaning in messages, and (e) following instructions and directions. Parts a, b, and d, are designed to measure listening skills used in short-term listening situations. Parts c and e are designed to measure listening skills used in long-term listening situations (Watson & Barker, 1987). The test is designed to provide a measurement of interpersonal listening abilities for adults and mature college level students. The instrument consists of 50 test items, 10 items per subtest, and requires a standardized administration. The video version of the WBLT was chosen

because listening involves more than just the ears. It also involves analyzing the paralanguage message as well as the verbal message, and also gaining knowledge from other aspects of nonverbal transmission (Roberts, 1987). The creation of the video-tape was based on the original audio version of the WBLT. The authors of the test reported significant positive correlations between Form A and Form B of the audio version of the test ($r = .42$, $p < .05$) (Watson & Barker, 1985). Studies investigating the reliability of the video version are now being conducted. Preliminary results show a test-retest reliability of $r = .68$ with a waiting period ranging from 24 hours to 12 weeks between the two forms of the test (Barker, 1988, personal communication).

The language course in which the students were enrolled lasted nine and one-half weeks, at the rate of six hours a day, five days a week, which amounts to a total of 285 hours of instruction. The program included aspects of proficiency-oriented instruction in that the communication skills, including listening comprehension and oral proficiency, were emphasized, and an attempt was made to contextualize instruction in each language. The term language proficiency in this study is used in a global sense to mean measurable levels of competence in each of the four communication skills in a foreign language. At the end of the summer intensive language program the students were requested to respond to their respective foreign language

(FL) test --French or Spanish-- developed by the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Tennessee. The FL tests consisted of an oral interview, a listening comprehension component, and a written grammar, reading and vocabulary component. In order to make comparisons across tests, raw scores were converted to T-scores providing a common scale. The overall score for the foreign language measure was computed by giving equal weight to the speaking scores, the listening scores, and the combined grammar-reading-vocabulary scores. The rationale behind this division is based on the division of skills used in the tests. The grammar, reading, and vocabulary scores were combined because they were all tested with paper-and-pencil tests, as opposed to an oral exam and a pure listening exam.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

To determine the relationship between listening ability and foreign language proficiency, simple bivariate correlation and multiple regression correlation coefficients were computed. To determine the strength of the relationship between five identified predictor variables (WBLT, sex, length of previous language exposure, language exposed to, and last contact with the language) and FL proficiency, the data were subjected to stepwise multiple regression analyses. The unit of analysis of the data was the individual student. All statistical analyses were performed for the French and

Spanish groups separately, since they differed from each other in terms of homogeneity of groups and demographic variables (composition of the groups, exposure to other languages, interest in language study...).

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients were used to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between the overall listening ability, as measured by the WBLT, and the foreign language variables (overall FL proficiency, proficiency in listening, and proficiency in speaking). The observed relationships between the variables of interest are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlation (n) Between Listening Ability and Overall Foreign Language Proficiency by Group

Foreign Language Proficiency	Group	
	French (n = 36)	Spanish (n = 54)
Overall	.41*	.39**
Listening Comprehension Skills	.30	.43**
Oral Proficiency (Speaking Skills)	.37*	.29*

*p < .05 **p < .01

Significant correlations were observed for each group between listening ability and overall FL proficiency (French: r = .41, Spanish: r = .39, p< .05), as well as between

listening ability and foreign language speaking skills (French: r= .37, Spanish: r = .29, p< .05).

The relationship between the five listening skills described above and measured by the WBLT, and the FL variables: listening comprehension, speaking (oral proficiency), and overall proficiency was determined by subjecting the data to stepwise multiple regression analyses.

Listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension

The results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis of the WBLT subtests on FL listening comprehension are reported in Tables 2 and 3 for the French and Spanish groups respectively.

Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Five WBLT Subtests on Foreign Language Listening Comprehension--Spanish

Variables Entered	β	F	Increase in R^2 Per Step
1. Message Content	.44	15.30*	.23
2. Lectures	.19	2.35	.03

$R = .51$, $R^2 = .26$, $F(2,53) = 9.01$, $p < .005$

*$p < .005$

Note: $n = 54$

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Five WBLT Subtests on Foreign Language Listening Comprehension--French

Variables (Subtests) Entered	β	F	Increase in R^2 Per Step
1. Emotional Meaning	.35	9.18*	.21
2. Instructions	.23	3.30	.07
3. Lectures	-.33	2.82	.06
4. Message Content	.24	2.33	.05

$R = .62$, $R^2 = .38$, $F(4,31) = 4.91$, $p < .005$

*$p < .005$

Note: $n = 36$

As is shown for the French group, 38% of the variance was explained by the variables emotional meaning, instructions, lectures, and message content. In contrast, for the Spanish group, 26% of the variance was explained by the variables message content, and lectures.

Listening ability and foreign language speaking skills

In table 4 are summarized the analyses of the WBLT subtests on FL speaking skills.

Table 4

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Five WBLT Subtests on Foreign Language Speaking Skills--French

Variables Entered	β	F	Increase in R^2 Per Step
1. Emotional Meaning	.38	8.29*	.20
2. Instructions	.22	3.38	.07

$R = .52$, $R^2 = .27$, $F(2,33) = 6.12$, $p < .01$

*$p < .01$

Note: $n = 36$

For the Spanish group, only one variable met the .15 significance level and was entered in the equation: message content. This variable yielded an $R = .33$, $R^2 = .11$, $F(1,52) = 6.39$ ($p < .01$).

Listening ability and overall FL proficiency

The results of the stepwise multiple regression equation determining the relationship between listening ability and overall FL proficiency are reported in Table 5. The WBLT listening subtest entered in the regression equation for the Spanish group was the variable "message content" yielding $R = .45$, $R^2 = .20$, $F(1,52) = 12.90$ ($p = .0007$). Table 6 gives an overview of the order of entry, across groups, of the WBLT

subtests in equations attempting to predict FL listening ccomprehension, FL speaking, and overall FL proficiency.

Table 5

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Five WBLT Subtests on Overall Foreign Language Proficiency--French

Variables Entered	β	F	Increase in R^2 Per Step
1. Emotional Meaning	.46	12.75**	.27
2. Instructions	.31	4.83*	.09

$R = .60$, $R^2 = .37$, $F(2,33) = 9.50$, $p < .001$

*p < .05, **p < .01

Note: n = 36

Table 6

Summary of the Order of Entry, Across Groups, of the WBLT Subtests in the Stepwise Multiple Regression Equations Attempting to Predict Foreign Language Listening Comprehension, Foreign Language Speaking, Overall Foreign Language Proficiency

Criterion Variable	Steps	Groups	
		French	Spanish
FL Listening Comprehension	1.	Emotional Meaning	Message Content
	2.	Instructions	Lectures
	3.	Lectures	--
	4.	Message Content	--
FL Speaking	1.	Emotional Meaning	Message Content
	2.	Instructions	--
FL Overall	1.	Emotional Meaning	Message Content
	2.	Instructions	--

As is shown in Table 6, a clear pattern seems to emerge within each group in the variables that contribute to the model. For the French group, the variables 'emotional meaning' and 'instructions' consistently contributed the greatest amount of unique variance in the model attempting to predict the three criterion variables. For the Spanish group, on the other hand, the variable 'message content' contributed the greatest amount of unique variance in the three models. Only in the model attempting to predict FL listening comprehension did both groups share two variables: message content and lectures.

Five predictor variables and FL proficiency

In assessing the strength of the relationship between five predictor variables (WBLT, sex, length of previous language exposure, language exposed to, and last contact with the language) and FL proficiency, the data were subjected to a stepwise multiple regression analysis. Summary analyses by language group are reported in Table 7. For the French group, then, listening ability as measured by the WBLT contributed the greatest amount of unique variable to the model attempting to predict FL proficiency. For the Spanish group, the WBLT was also entered first in the equation and was the only variable entered that met the .15 significance level for entry into the model

Table 7

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Three Predictor Variables: WBLT Overall, Sex, Length of Previous Language Exposure--French

Variables Entered	B	F	Increase in R^2 Per Step
1. WBLT	.44	7.06*	.17
2. Length	.38	7.68**	.16
3. Sex	.23	2.78	.05

$R = .62$, $R^2 = .38$, $F(3,32) = 6.59$, $p < .005$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

DISCUSSION

Results of this study suggest a positive relationship between listening ability and foreign language acquisition. More specifically, statistically significant relationships were found to exist between listening ability and overall FL proficiency, between listening ability and FL listening comprehension skills, and between listening ability and FL oral proficiency skills. Seventeen percent of the variance in the FL proficiency scores for the French group and 15% of the variance in the FL proficiency scores for the Spanish group were explained by the listening ability variable when this variable was expressed as a composite score. What appears to be even more significant are the results derived from considering listening as a set of skills. When listening was examined as a set of skills and correlated with

the FL variables using multiple correlation coefficients, the relationships ranged from R^2 = .11 to R^2 = .38. In other words, when listening is considered as a set of skills, the portions of variance in foreign language acquisition that can now be explained by listening ability range from 11 percent to 38 percent.

The listening ability variable examined in this study represents a factor contributing to the second language acquisition process not previously identified. To be able to explain 11% to 38% of variance in foreign language acquisition seems promising, especially when compared to portions of variance in foreign language acquisition that have previously been explained by other causal variables (Krashen, 1982) as described in the second language acquisition literature. Some of the variables that have been identified as showing positive correlations with measures of achievement in second language are: Length of residence in the second language environment, reported use of the second language, foreign language aptitude (especially phonetic discrimination), motivation, etc. The difference between listening ability and the causative variables mentioned earlier, as well as between listening ability and aptitude variables, is that listening ability can be improved through training, whereas the other variables are either innate or difficult to control (e.g., Length of Residence).

These results are not surprising since we do know that listening plays an active role in the language acquisition process (Asher, 1977; H.D. Brown, 1980; Krashen, 1982; Omaggio, 1986; Postovsky, 1975), that there is a positive transfer from listening to speaking (Nord, 1977), and that the listening skill is being drawn upon more heavily in the communicative approaches and proficiency approaches to language teaching.

Listening ability also contributed more to the predictability of FL proficiency than identified variables such as: sex, length of previous language exposure, language exposed to, and last contact with the language. Variables such as "length of previous language exposure" and "last contact with the language" have been recognized in the Second Language Acquisition field as causal variables affecting language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), but listening had not been recognized.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this exploratory study is the indication that listening ability emerged as an important component in the process of foreign language acquisition. It seems critical that additional studies address the relationship between listening ability and FL proficiency. Since it has been argued in the field of listening that this ability can be trained, the ultimate goal would be to investigate the effect of listening training on foreign language acquisition.

NOTES

1. The bibliographies and books of readings compiled by Duker (1964, 1966, 1968, 1971, 1974) survey the important studies in the field up to 1974 and represent milestones in the development of listening as a field.

2. Among the major reports he cited were: "A Nation At Risk," by the National Commission on Excellence in Education; "The Report of Secondary Education in America," by the Carnegie Foundation; and the College Entrance Examination Board's report.

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